

U.S. sending nonviolent, "low-risk" migrants to Guantanamo, despite vow to detain "the worst" there

By [Camilo Montoya-Galvez](#) Updated on: February 12, 2025 / 4:01 PM EST

Washington — While the Trump administration has [highlighted](#) transfers of dangerous criminals and suspected gang members to Guantanamo Bay, it is also sending nonviolent, "low-risk" migrant detainees who lack serious criminal records or any at all, according to two U.S. officials and internal government documents.

When he ordered officials to convert facilities inside the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, into a large-scale immigration detention site late last month, President Trump [said](#) it would house the "worst" migrants and "provide additional detention space for high-priority criminal aliens."

Administration officials have since touted military flights to Guantanamo that [they said](#) have transported migrants in the U.S. illegally who have also committed violent crimes like murder and rape, as well as alleged members of Tren de Aragua, the infamous gang that originated in Venezuelan

prisons.

Internal documents and interviews with U.S. officials indicate the administration has sent migrant criminals and alleged gang members to Guantanamo, detaining them in the post-9/11 maximum-security prison that also houses, in a separate section, more than a dozen terrorism suspects.

But in addition to sending those with criminal records or suspected or known gang ties — classified as "high-risk" detainees — U.S. officials have also transported migrants deemed to be "low-risk" to Guantanamo, according to the government documents obtained by CBS News. More low-risk migrants are expected to be transported on Wednesday, alongside high-risk detainees, the documents show.

Federal immigration authorities define low-risk detainees as migrants who face deportation because they are in the U.S. illegally but who have not been arrested or convicted of violent offenses or other serious crimes, [government guidelines](#) show. U.S. officials said they could include migrants who lack any criminal record but have been ordered deported because of civil immigration violations, like entering the country without proper documents.

While the high-risk migrants have been detained in cells at Guantanamo's maximum-security prison, the low-risk detainees have been placed in a barrack-like facility known

as the Migrant Operations Center that includes rooms with restrooms, according to the documents and one of the U.S. officials, who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the press.

The State Department has traditionally used the Migrant Operations Center to house asylum-seekers intercepted at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard, while they wait to be resettled in third countries.

In a statement Wednesday, a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson confirmed CBS News' reporting, including the separate housing arrangements.

"In addition to holding violent gang members and other high-threat illegal aliens, Guantanamo Bay is also holding other illegal aliens with final deportation orders. Every single alien at Guantanamo Bay has a final deportation order," the spokesperson said. "All of these individuals committed a crime by entering the United States illegally."

In two weeks, officials have made some progress in operationalizing Mr. Trump's instructions to establish the facilities needed to detain as many as 30,000 unauthorized migrants at the base in Guantanamo, a 45-square mile stretch of Cuban land that the U.S. has leased for over a century.

Over the past week, U.S. service members at the base have been erecting tents to house migrant detainees beyond the prison and Migrant Operations Center, both of which have limited capacities.



A photo released by the Pentagon shows tents being erected to house migrants at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay in Cuba on Feb. 6, 2025. U.S. Navy / AFN Guantanamo Bay Public Affairs

Officials have also been meeting the administration's goal of transporting groups of detainees to the base daily, sending eight military flights over the last nine days. The flights, however, have only carried up to 15 detainees each, due to limits on how many can be transported at one time when they reach the base.

As of late Tuesday, nearly 100 unauthorized migrants were being held at Guantanamo, all of them adults from Venezuela, one of the U.S. officials said. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said recently the detainees will be held there until they can be deported, but it's unclear when that could happen.

In recent years, Venezuela's repressive government has generally rejected American deportation flights, citing the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. Under a recently brokered agreement with the Trump administration, Venezuela sent two planes to the Texas border earlier this week to pick nearly 200 of its citizens who were in U.S. immigration custody and transport them back to Venezuela. But similar flights to Guantanamo have not been announced.

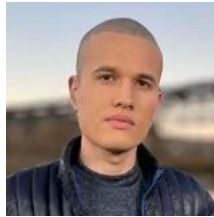
While some Republican lawmakers have [praised](#) the Trump administration for using Guantanamo to hold migrant detainees, the effort has alarmed pro-immigrant civil rights groups. They have accused the administration of using the naval base as a "legal black hole" to hold migrants "incommunicado," demanding that the detainees be given access to lawyers.

While the transportation of low-risk migrants to Guantanamo undermines statements from [Trump officials](#) that the facility would be used to house "the worst of the worst," it also reinforces a message the administration has communicated

repeatedly: no one who is in the U.S. illegally will be shielded from detention and deportation, even if they lack criminal histories.

[Eleanor Watson](#) contributed to this report.

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